



Viewpoint

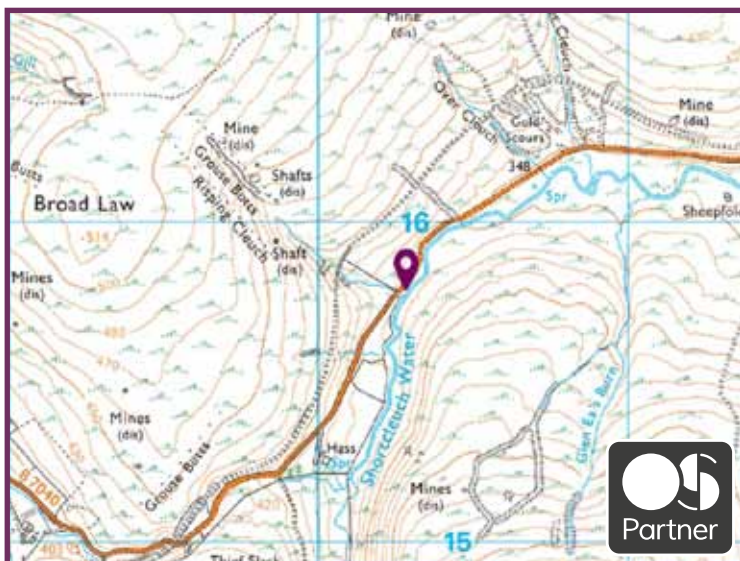
## All that glitters



Time: 15 mins

Region: Scotland

Landscape: rural



**Location:** Lay-by off the B7040, near Leadhills, Dumfries and Galloway ML12 6YG

**Grid reference:** NS 90282 15785

**Getting there:** The lay-by is on the left hand side approximately 4 miles from the J14 roundabout of the M74 (just over 1 mile before reaching the town of Leadhills).

**Keep an eye out for:** Specs of gold in the nearby Shortcleuch River!

When you picture gold prospectors you will probably imagine the nineteenth century Wild West. But you don't need to travel back in time or across to the USA to do some gold prospecting of your own.

In Britain and Ireland there are several locations where, if you have plenty of time and a lot of luck, you can catch your own 'nugget' of gold.

These hills ahead aren't the highest in Britain and the river next to you is far from being the longest or widest, but both are unique in what they contain.

## Why might you strike gold in the Leadhills?



Nestled at the bottom of Scotland, we're not so much in the 'Wild West' but a 'Secluded South'. How this gently undulating slice of Scotland became dotted with shimmers of gold is a story of ancient origins - mountains, rivers and things from outer space!

It is hard to imagine, but about 455 million years ago the landscape here lay at the bottom of a deep sea, known as the Iapetus Ocean. With no wind or ocean currents, layers of ground on the sea floor were laid very slowly. Every now and again, however, elements and minerals did take hold in the land below the sea.

Most of these were formed on Earth but some actually came from space! Precious metals such as gold and silver entered the Earth's atmosphere within asteroids or meteorites. These scattered across the Earth and joined the terrestrial particles, where some eventually settled at the bottom of the Iapetus Ocean.

The Iapetus Ocean covered several pieces of the Earth's crust, called continental plates. These plates shifted across the planet's surface over hundreds of thousands of years.

Such plates still shift today and cause earthquakes. As the plates moved the huge forces involved pushed the land upwards, creating the mountains we can see today.

This process meant sediments and minerals, including the seams of gold, were lifted from the bottom of the oceans to the top of the Leadhills.

These hillsides don't literally 'glitter with gold' but we can work out where this precious metal is. The layers of rocks containing these metals (known as ores) are in fairly straight lines, so it was easy to establish where the gold would be lurking. As a result, gold, silver and lead were mined from the rocks beneath our feet from the 16th century.

As the metal stocks from the ores became exhausted or difficult to extract, attention turned towards the rivers. Fast-flowing rivers scour out and erode softer rocks or soils, which then get transported downstream. As a river slows down or changes its course, it begins dropping sediments along its route. In this case, gold!

Metals carried by rivers line up next to each other rather than get buried deep down. So there is every chance gold could be found in these rivers and streams on any given day. Every now and again the river changes course and reveals more gold previously thought to have been exhausted.

People have come to this part of Scotland for decades to pan for gold. But the gold has been on a journey lasting 455 million years. It has travelled through space and across the planet, surviving prehistoric seas, ancient mountain-building, and the gold rush of the sixteenth century.

Could this river make someone a very rich person in the future? Only time will tell...

## A flash in the pan

Although not on the scale of that in 19th century America; Scotland and Northern Ireland also had their own mini-gold rush. In 1868 gold was found in Helmsdale River, in the Scottish Highlands. The Illustrated London News ran a story about it and within a few months, over 600 men had arrived! The usually deserted Glen became crowded with pans and prospectors.

But the excitement was short lived. Lasting just one year, the mini-gold rush was over almost as soon as it had started. While whole gold-rush towns lie abandoned in the USA, here in Scotland, the rivers just continue to flow peacefully, almost as if nothing ever happened.